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Better You than Me, Kid  
The Importance of Writing in all Content Areas

I sit here trying to type a paper on the importance of writing and I think it is ironic that I am finding it so hard to get started. My own writing fear is beginning to resurface and I feel myself about to hyperventilate. I think to myself, I have to write TWELVE pages? How am I going to find enough words to fill TWELVE pages and make it sound intelligent?? I think back to the fifteen page paper I had to write on the Tall Grass Prairie my last year at Michigan State University and think to myself, “If I can write and ace that paper, I can write anything. I can do this.” It is just a matter of organizing my thoughts, prewriting, writing, revising, and just setting a time to sit down and actually focus on the assignment. I know part of my fear is based on the type of genre I am writing: a research paper, expository. I feel that out of all the genres this one is the one that is less creative, less fun to write. Give me a creative writing piece and I will not only write it—I will *enjoy* writing it. Then I think to myself, if I feel this way, how in the world can *I*, get my students to enjoy writing instead of fearing it.

When I work in a classroom helping students with a writing assignment I always tell them, “It is the starting of it that is the hardest. Getting that first paragraph down and getting the words flowing, that is the most challenging. Yet, once you get going the rest will tumble out.” Sometimes they look at me like I am

Anna Walters  
TE 848  
Teaching Project  
4/18/10

crazy but other times they get it. I always work with them on the brainstorming aspect of the writing piece and getting them to organize their thoughts on a graphic organizer. These tools helping them to get the ball rolling on their writing; often times when I help them I think to myself, *Better you than me kid! I know exactly how you feel.* I also know I am not alone in these thoughts.

The school I work at is currently in the process of changing from a two person partnership (where each person is in charge of two subjects) to a four team set-up. That is a lot of pressure for the individual that teaches language arts—most notably the writing portion. They are responsible, not only to make sure 120 students are reading at grade level, but they also are responsible for making sure 120 students can *write!* Sure, you can say that about the math teacher, social studies teacher, and science teacher; they have their own standards to worry about. However, according to The National Commission on Writing, “More than 90 percent of midcareer professionals recently cited the, “need to write effectively” as a skill “of great importance, in their day to day work”, (Writing Ticket to Work pg 14). The language arts teacher is teaching to that “great importance” and that is a lot to carry on one person’s shoulders. Now the other teachers are thinking, “better you than me, kid,” and that is not right. Teaching a student how to write effectively is a team effort therefore writing should be included in all content areas on a daily basis.

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4/18/10

### *Teachers and Writing*

It seems like an obvious solution. Why aren't all teachers including more writing in some context during their lessons? It seems like a no brainer. If writing is so important to a child why not make sure it is being taught on a continuous basis throughout the day? The National Commission on Writing states, "Writing is not a frill for the few, but an essential skill for the many," (The Neglected R, pg12); so, you would think that writing should be constantly integrated throughout the school day. Yet, the data shows that for the most part students only spend about 7 percent of the school day, and this includes homework, writing more than a sentence (Bowie, 1996). That means, out of the, roughly, four hours (240 minutes) that students are actually taking part in instruction 16.8 minutes are spent writing. Is this enough time to actually shape students into confident writers? Are we treating writing as an "essential skill" all students need? When we send these students to the next grade or to the next stage in their educational career—college—are they prepared? The answer is no! No one can be prepared with only having that much of practice. Yet, why is this lack of teaching writing happening?

Part of the reason, according to Robert Bowie, is that teachers themselves are not confident in their own writing skills because of their lack of writing knowledge; they do not feel comfortable teaching another person to write (Future Teachers' Perceptions of Themselves as Writers, pg. 2). Even though teachers understand the importance of including writing in all content areas most do not

Anna Walters  
TE 848  
Teaching Project  
4/18/10

want to be the one to do the actual teaching of the writing (Bowie, 2). Hey better you than me kid, right? Yet, can we really blame teachers for feeling this way to begin with?

It is no wonder that teachers do not feel comfortable in teaching writing. Teachers were students at one point in time and had issues with writing when they, themselves, were learning to write. They also received those 16.8 minutes of valuable writing practice during their time as a student as well. Then they entered college. During that time, according to the article "Righting the Writing Problem," most college students avoid classes where writing is required heavily in a course (Shaughnessy, pg 6). Then these same teachers, former college students, find themselves in a school district that is asking them to teach something they may have avoided most of their life--writing. This fear of writing may be the reason these teachers leaned towards teaching math, science, or social studies to begin with. Now we are asking them to teach something they lack in confidence and skill in their own content area. They may then question, why do I even have to teach writing anyway?

In math, science, and social studies we want our students to be critical thinkers. During math, students need to evaluate data and problem solve. In science students need to draw inferences and develop hypothesis, and in social studies students need to compare and contrast different time periods and analyze major and minor points in history. These are all higher thinking skills that

Anna Walters  
TE 848  
Teaching Project  
4/18/10

students need to possess to accomplish these goals. If teachers ask why they should integrate writing into these content areas they need to know that writing helps students achieve these higher learning skills. “When teachers throughout the school regularly assign writing to reinforce content, writing becomes a natural part of learning for students,” (Clark, 1984). When writing is used a deeper understanding of the content being taught is developed because students are being asked to reinforce what they are learning by writing. Writing should not only be used as a form of tool to evaluate what the student “should have learned” but be used as a vehicle to show the process of what *is* being learned and the understanding behind it, (Yates, pg 7). We do not want the regurgitation of history facts, science terms, or math skills; we want them to make connections and reflect on what is being taught and to fully understand these concepts. If writing is being used effectively in the classroom then this deep understanding will occur. Clearly, as teachers, we want our students to be able to think and since writing is the stepping stone to thinking, it is pertinent that all teachers become confident writers; if teachers are confident in their writing then they may be more prone to include writing in their own content area.

### ***Getting Teachers to Want to Teach Writing***

Since the problem of why teachers do not want to teach writing is because of their own lack of writing skills then districts need to make sure that teachers have the opportunity to learn the process of teaching writing. Districts also need

Anna Walters  
TE 848  
Teaching Project  
4/18/10

to offer their teachers assistance and support to make sure they feel the administrators don't have the attitude, "Hey, better you than me." To build confidence in something that is out of the norm for teachers there needs to be plenty of opportunity to learn that new skill.

As we have determined, teachers came from the same classrooms—for the most part—as today. They had 16.8 minutes of writing instruction per day themselves. The National Commission on Writing states, "That few states even require courses in writing for certification, even for elementary school teachers," (The Neglected R, pg 26). Then once they are thrown in the classroom teaching districts rarely offer in-service learning opportunities in regards to writing and if they do teachers may not want to take the time to even take part in the chance to learn more about writing (The Neglected R, pg 26). If writing is an important skill for students to learn, and all teachers agree that writing is indeed important, then a redesign of professional developments needs to be on the priority list so the next generations of teachers have more confidence in writing as the previous generation. Or the cycle will keep on occurring.

Teachers need to be required to take in-service professional development classes on writing and a strong writing network needs to be established so teachers gain the confidence to integrate writing into their content area. Teachers need to become writers first, learn the process of writing, and then be asked to teach what they have learned to their students. If teachers are given the opportunity to view

Anna Walters  
TE 848  
Teaching Project  
4/18/10

themselves as writers, have the chance to respond to peer and student writing examples, and are given the chance to gain a better understanding of the writing process then, and only then, can they be *successful* teachers of writing (The Neglected R, pg 34). Students can also sense a teacher's hesitation in teaching a concept or skill. If the teachers lack confidence, then the students could be affected by this attitude. Allowing the teachers more time for growth in the writing process will create a learning environment that is more conducive to developing excellent writing. Yet, again, how would teaching writing in math, science, or social studies even make a difference in a students understanding of that content area?

***Journal Writing: Integrating it into the Content Areas and why it is Effective***

What would be the reason to ask a teacher of science, math, or social studies to start integrating writing in his/her curriculum? This teacher has other goals and standards to meet in their given content area, these standards do not include how to write, and his purpose is to make sure his students are learning his required benchmarks. Why then must he teach writing? The most important answer to this question is that writing "has a powerful influence on students learning in other areas," (Jewell, pg 4). Through writing, students gain a better chance at fully understanding the concepts that are being taught because they are

Anna Walters  
TE 848  
Teaching Project  
4/18/10

given the chance to write about the topic (Jewell, pg 4). If writing can enhance what is being learned in science, math or social studies then my question to those teachers would be, “Why not?”

One way that writing can be included in other areas of content is through journal writing. Journal writing is a valuable tool that can be included in science, math, and social studies. Journal writing has been proven to help increase reading comprehension and it also has been proven to be an effective tool to help personalize math learning (Jewell, pg 4). Journal writing gives the students a chance to write what is being taught in a non-threatening way, not putting an emphasis on mechanics or grammar, which makes it easier for students to grasp the major concepts being taught. However, teachers that implement journal writing into their lessons still should follow important guidelines to make sure that it is effectively being used in their classroom. The last thing that should happen is journal writing being thrown into the curriculum without much thought or consideration being put into it.

Journal writing could be a great tool to use in the science curriculum. In science, an individual needs to be able to communicate effectively through verbal communication skills and written communication skills (Ediger, pg 1). If journal writing is implemented into the science curriculum then these skills can be honed and improved. As students get ready to do experiments or are being introduced to a new unit topic, including journal writing will help them prepare themselves for



Anna Walters  
TE 848  
Teaching Project  
4/18/10

the upcoming tasks. It can offer a chance to get them brainstorming about the topic and help them become engaged in the assignment.

Another benefit of journal writing is it is a way to assess the growth of a student's development in both writing and the student's knowledge in what is being taught. A student's journal is a portal into that student's knowledge of the topic, feelings towards the topic, and what the student may need to gain a better understanding of what is being taught (Jewell, pg 8). Whether the journal is being used in math, science, or social studies it can be a useful tool for students to demonstrate what they are learning and also what they may not be learning. Journal writing can be a very effective tool in the classroom as long as it is implemented in a positive light and a consistent set of guidelines is being used throughout the school and content areas.

### ***Integrating Non-Fiction Writing in all Content Areas***

Writing is an awesome tool that can be used to engage the students in what is being taught and also assess the student's learning in a specific lesson (Duke, pg 6). One way to integrate learning into all subject areas is through non-fiction writing. Currently, there is an emphasis and a growing awareness on making sure students are aware of other genres, such as non-fiction writing, outside of the normal narrative writing genre (Tower, pg 2). There are many ways non-fiction can be integrated into the science, social studies, and math curriculum that can prove to

Anna Walters  
TE 848  
Teaching Project  
4/18/10

be an effective way to help students gain a broader knowledge base of what the content area is teaching.

One way non-fiction writing can be integrated into social studies is through newspaper articles. For example, after teaching a unit on the Civil War a teacher could have the students pick an important event that occurred during that period and write a newspaper article highlighting the main ideas of that event. This assignment will serve as both an assessment for the topic that was taught and a way to engage the students in high order thinking. One way to make the assignment more effective is to make sure the purpose of the newspaper article and the audience it is attended for is stated at the beginning of the assignment.

Integrating non-fiction writing into the content areas is a great tool to help students become successful writers and also to help them further understand what is being taught within the content area. However, to make non-fiction writing and any genre of writing for that matter, more effective a purpose and an audience needs to be established. For example, if a student's purpose is to write for a classroom publication, something that is going to be viewed by someone else other than their teacher, then a drive to do better will emerge (Ten Ideas that get Kids Writing, pg 12). They know the audience that is going to be reading their work is their classmates and the purpose is to inform them on a major event that happened during the Civil War.

Anna Walters  
TE 848  
Teaching Project  
4/18/10

***Making sure the Writing Process is not lost in the Integration Process***

Writing is an important skill that needs to be taught more than 16.8 minutes in a school day. If teachers in other subjects take a moment to realize how they can include writing into their curriculum those minutes will continue to grow exponentially. However, it is important to realize that teachers can not just throw a writing lesson to their students and leave out the teaching of the writing process. Just like a math teacher can not throw fractions at their students and expect them to add them, a writing assignment can not be given to a student without direct instruction. This realization is the key motivation why teachers outside their comfort zone do not want to include writing into their curriculum. Even though the importance of writing is there, most of the hiring companies take writing skills into consideration when hiring potential employees, (Writing Ticket to Work, pg 3), teachers that lack the foundation in writing hesitate to teach it.

To help with teachers' anxiety on the writing process it helps that each district develops a program that helps the teachers' transition into their new roles and responsibilities which can take three to five years to develop and implement (Clark, pg 3). If there is a lot of support and chances for the teachers to expand their skills then the chances that students will be given the best possible education will be achieved.

Anna Walters  
TE 848  
Teaching Project  
4/18/10

### ***Better All of Us Rather than Just You***

Reading and Math are always on the forefront of educators minds.

However, as it can clearly be seen, writing is also an important skill that must be given the same priority as the other subjects. To make sure that writing is given the same attention as math and reading it needs to be taught more than the 16.8 minutes it is currently being taught. To do this, teachers need to be aware of how to teach the process of writing, teachers need to be given ideas of how to include the writing within their content area, and school districts need to offer teachers support both emotionally and professionally to help achieve these goals. Our goal is to educate our students and to send them out into the world with the knowledge they need to succeed and to be well-rounded and thoughtful citizens. Making sure writing has its place in the curriculum would help accomplish that goal. As the National Council of Teachers of English quoted, "Clear writing leads to clear thinking. Clear thinking is the basis of clear writing. Perhaps more than any other form of communication, writing holds us responsible for our words and ultimately makes us more thoughtful human beings," (Clark, pg 3). Isn't that what we want our students to become...thoughtful human beings?

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Teaching Project  
4/18/10

### Three Integrated Writing Lesson Ideas

Below are three ideas of how I would integrate writing into the other content areas. These lessons just give a summary of what I would do but do not talk at length of exactly how I would introduce, model, and teach each writing genre.

Lesson Plan Summary  
Science and Writing: Non-Fiction Writing  
Grade 5  
Ohio State Standards

#### **Life Sciences**

4. Summarize that organisms can survive only in ecosystems in which their needs can be met (e.g., food, water, shelter, air, carrying capacity and waste disposal). The world has different ecosystems and distinct ecosystems support the lives of different types of organisms.
5. Support how an organism's patterns of behavior are related to the nature of that organism's ecosystem, including the kinds and numbers of other organisms present, the availability of food and resources, and the changing physical characteristics of the ecosystem.

**Goal/Objective:** At the end of the unit the students will be asked to pick an animal in an ecosystem and write a Scientific Magazine Article for Mrs. Walters Online Science Plethora on that animal's shelter, food, behavior, environment requires. They are to include how that animals behaviors affects that ecosystem. Students will be requires to gather pictures of anything pertaining to their choice animals needs and create a Digital Story displaying everything they learned on their animal.

Lesson Plan Summary  
Social Studies and Writing: Narrative  
Grade 5  
Ohio State Standards

Anna Walters  
TE 848  
Teaching Project  
4/18/10

### **History: Settlement**

3. Explain why European countries explored and colonized North America.
4. Describe the lasting effects of Spanish, French and English colonization in North America including cultural patterns evident today such as language, food, traditions and architecture.

Goal/Objective: During the unit the students will be asked to write diary entries for a young colonist. They will pick a name for their colonist and describe what their day was like. The students will need 5 diary entries.

Lesson Plan Summary  
Math and Writing: Informative  
Grade 5  
Ohio State Standards

### **Number, Number Sense and Operations Standard**

Goal/Objective: At the end of the year students will pick on concept that was taught to them throughout the year (i.e adding subtracting fractions) and create a visual presentation (PowerPoint, Flipchart, Camastasia) that gives a detailed lesson on the math concept they picked. The purpose of this project is to see if the students fully understand the concept and also to use as a tool for other students that may struggle with that math concept.

Anna Walters  
TE 848  
Teaching Project  
4/18/10

### My Teaching Project Reflection

As it goes, the revision part of writing is hardest for me. I can be honest, when I finish writing I like to place my stamp of approval on it immediately and not take another look at it. My head is drained and I am no longer able to construct intelligent sentences. Sometimes, I even think of it as going in to take a big test and the philosophy, "well if I don't know it now then there is not much I can do about it now." One reason for this is I actually revise as I write. As I was writing this paper and I found my self in a writing slump (which I blamed on my muse) I will periodically go back to the beginning of my paper and re-read it. From there I catch my mistakes or add things that I have thought of. Because of this I find the task of turning in two drafts for this paper pretty challenging. However, when I do revise, as I did for this paper, I mostly go back reading it out loud. In the past, I use to instill my mom's expertise and have her read my papers but now-a-days I do it myself.

I remember right after graduating from high school I had zero confidence in writing. I took my first Writing class at a community college and I had to write argumentative papers. I remember this because I use to have to start the writing process months before it was due. Writing drained me. After revisiting this type of writing in this class I want to make sure my students know that good writing does not develop over night. The best writers are still challenged everyday, trying to improve their writing. Writing is a process there is always room for improvement. Therefore, don't get discouraged but also don't think you know it all.

For expository writing, I feel there is a formula to it. For *some* beginning writers, those that struggle like I did, I think teaching to this formula helps them improve their writing. Once my students grow as writers the formula becomes less dominant in their writing style and their voice will begin to be heard. For those struggling writers that is how I would like to guide them; however, for the students that are a little better at writing I would like to guide them to come up with their own way of doing a paper like this. I hate restrictions when it comes to writing, so I hate putting restrictions on my students writing. I want them to be creative but also know how to do that and still hit everything that needs to be covered.

I learned that expository writing is still my least favorite writing genre. It is just so stifling because you have to back up your thoughts with someone else that stated that same idea. At least that was what I was taught and as I was working on this paper that belief still was prominent. I almost feel why bother writing it if someone else already wrote it? However, I also learned that being able to coherently explain your idea in

Anna Walters

TE 848

Teaching Project

4/18/10

writing has its benefits and I want my students to understand that being able to communicate effectively by writing is a very important skill to have in life.